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## THE ASHERAH.

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Students of biblical archæology are agreed that the Asherahs, the “groves” of the Received Version, were wooden columns, which were emblems of gods, or accessories to worship; but I believe no careful study of these asherahs has been made from the archæological side. It has hardly occurred to students, in their careless observation of a pillar on a coin or a seal here and there, to differentiate these asherahs, and try to find out whether they differed and how they differed from each other, and how the several gods were represented. It is a partial study of this subject that is proposed here.

We are familiar with the representation in Roman times of certain gods of country life by columns. They are generally called *Hermæ*, because *Hermes* was often so represented in this cheap way. The body was a single column, square or round, with no human form, except often the phallus, and it was surmounted by a bearded head of the god. It is such a column that is referred to in one of *Virgil's Eclogues*, where *Thyrsis* vows to *Priapus*, “keeper of a poor garden,” that if the produce of the flocks allows, his little marble image shall be exchanged for one of gold.

At the time of the composition of this Hebrew literature which mentions the asherahs, the representation of the columns as altars or as gods was frequent in the art of the neighboring countries. They may be called indifferently columnar altars or columnar idols. Almost every one of the thousands of Assyrian cone seals contains the representation of two or more of these columns. There are certain standard styles of them, but there is very little in their design to indicate to which gods the several columns, or asherahs, belong. There was such a close relationship between the Babylonian (or Assyrian) gods and those of the Mediterranean coasts that, if we can distinguish the columnar emblems of the gods of the Euphrates valley, we shall be able to do the same for those of the Phœnician and Syrian regions.

Now, our clue to these has to be gained from those inscribed bas-reliefs, or steles, which contain a number of these emblems.



FIG. 1.—Worshiper before column of Marduk, and emblem of Nin-kharsag. *Metropolitan Museum.*

Some of them are bas-reliefs of Assyrian kings, with a number of emblems near the king's head. Others are funereal tablets containing the symbols of the gods. The larger number are what are called boundary stones, or kudûrus, which are really the records of deeds of grant of land, by kings, to men of note. There is a long inscription which describes the grant, concluding with a curse to be denounced by the gods figured on the stone on anyone who shall alienate the grant or remove the landmark. The upper part of the stone, or one side of it, is devoted to the emblems of these gods. A dozen or

two of these boundary stones, from Babylonia or Elam, have been found, and their inscriptions and designs published.

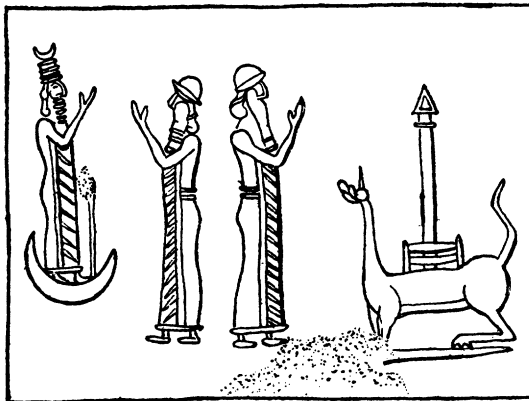


FIG. 2.—Worshiper before column of Marduk.

The usual types of the asherah, as it appears on the Assyrian cone seals and occasionally on the cylinders, will be seen in figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. By far the most frequent forms are the column with a triangular summit, and that of double vertical lines connected by one or more cross-lines. These two forms are usually

found together. Instead of the triangular summit of the first, a variation more easily engraved generally appears, consisting of a round dot a little below the summit (fig. 5), but the meaning is the same.

The first careful study of the emblems of gods found in connection with the bas-reliefs of the Assyrian kings was made by von Luschan, in a chapter on "The Monolith of Esarhaddon," contained in Heft XI ("Ausgrabungen in Sendschirli") of the *Mittheilungen aus den orientalischen Sammlungen* of the Imperial Museum of Berlin, 1893. This monolith, found at Senjirli, contains twelve figures, or emblems, of gods (fig. 6) just in front of the head of the king, one of the most elaborate of the designs of this sort known. Other

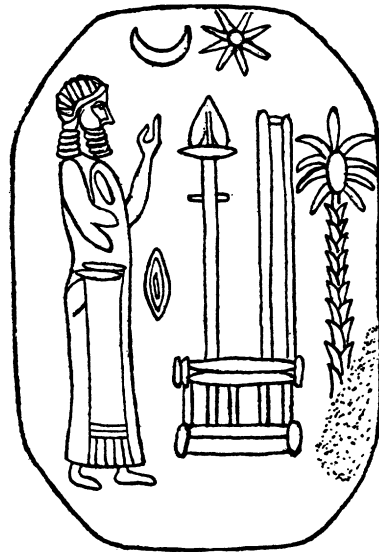


FIG. 4.—Worshiper before columns of Marduk and Nabu. *Museum of Avignon.*



FIG. 3.—Worshiper before columns of Marduk and Nabu. *Bibliothèque nationale.*

examples generally have a smaller number of emblems. Four of these emblems are such columns as are found on the cone seals. With this bas-relief von Luschan compares other steles of Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, Sargon, etc., also the bas-relief of Maltaia, all of which have similar figures. Of the identification of some of these emblems there can be no doubt. Thus the crescent is certainly the moon-god Sin, and the star is Ishtar; and there can be no question but that the deity who holds the thunderbolts is Ramman. We should also naturally conclude that the winged disk represents Assur. This would account for four out of the twelve figures. We now turn to the accompanying inscription, and we find that the king begins with an invocation to ten gods whom he

specifies, and then groups the rest "ili rabûti kališunu," "the great gods, all of them." The ten gods mentioned are

(in order) (1) Assur, (2) Anu, (3) Bel, (4) Ea, (5) Sin, (6) Shamash, (7) Ramman, (8) Marduk, (9) Ishtar, (10) the Seven, the last being the seven Igigi. Besides the seven deities here specified, Nabu is afterward named in connection with Marduk. Inasmuch as among the specified deities are the seven Igigi, it is easy to recognize the seven dots as representing these deities, which gives us five out of the twelve figures which we can recognize, but none of them columns.

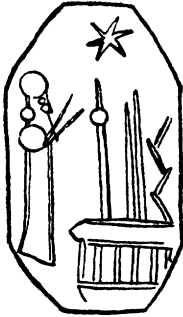


FIG. 5. — Worshiper before columns of Marduk, Nabu, and Ramman. *Metro-politan Museum.*

The inscription gives us hardly any further help, as the order of the figures and the names is evidently not the same, and especially as there are more deities figured than are specifically named in the inscription; and, further, only one goddess, Ishtar, is mentioned, while two appear to be figured, one the star of Ishtar and the other a seated goddess.

Next, von Luschan calls attention to a stele of Assurnazirbal on which are figured five emblems of gods, and on which five gods are invoked. We might naturally presume the five figured to be the same as the five invoked. They are the crescent, Sin; the star, Ishtar; the thunderbolt, Ramman; and also the familiar circle with four rays alternating with four streams, which we know to be Shamash. That leaves the horned hat, which would seem to be Assur, who is named and who had seemed previously to be represented by the winged circle.

In a second stele of Esarhaddon are figured six emblems of gods, and six are mentioned in the accompanying inscription. But the names of the gods and their figures do not correspond, and as none of them are columns we do not need to dwell on them. It would seem that the artist put in the small emblems as he happened to choose, while the scribe selected the names of the two triads of gods, except that Assur takes the place of Anu. Only two of his list appear to be figured.

Yet another stele of Esarhaddon, on the Nahr el-Kelb (fig. 7), shows eight emblems, of which two are columns. Unfortunately, the inscription is imperfectly preserved.

Another case to which von Luschan calls attention is a much more important one. It is the rock-relief of Sennacherib near Bavian (fig. 8). On it are twelve emblems of gods, and the inscription mentions twelve. We have observed that in previous cases there was no care taken to secure correspondence between



FIG. 6.—Upper part of bas-relief of Esarhaddon, Senjirli.

the emblems figured and the names or order of the gods mentioned, so that the list of gods invoked gave little help in identifying the emblems. Those in one category might not appear in the other. The artist of the emblems was not in consultation with the scribe. But in this case there is a correspondence, not observed by von Luschan, but recognized later by Jensen (*Hettiter und Armenier*, p. 143, note). There are twelve emblems, and twelve gods named; and the important fact is that the order in a number of cases is evidently the same. Thus the crescent, Sin, is fifth in both; Ramman's thunderbolt is seventh; the star of Ishtar is eleventh; and the seven dots of the Igigi are twelfth. These coincidences pass quite beyond any law of probabilities, and must be intentional. The one apparent violation of

coincidence is in the case of the god Shamash, who comes sixth in the list of gods. But the sixth emblem is the winged disk, which was supposed to represent usually Assur. It would here seem to represent Shamash; and, indeed, if it represented Assur it ought to hold the place of honor, coming first and not sixth, next after the moon, just as in fig. 6 it came between Sin and Ishtar. We then conclude that the winged disk must have originally represented the sun, and that later it was confined to the representation of Assur. Indeed, for all we know, Assur, who was a new Assyrian god unknown to the Babylonians, may have been originally a sun-god, and so at first identified or confused with Shamash. At any rate, the winged disk here appears to be the emblem of Shamash and not of Assur. Assur ought to have the first place in the designs, as he has in the inscriptions, and in that case he must be represented here by the first of the horned hats, or turbans.

We have, then, good reason to recognize the coincidence in the order of all those emblems that we know with the gods enumerated; and it follows that all the twelve emblems can be identified. The order is as follows:

1. Horned turban	= Assur
2.     "     "	= Anu
3.     "     "	= Bel
4. Column with ram's head	= Ea
5. Crescent	= Sin
6. Winged disk	= Shamash
7. Thunderbolt	= Ramman
8. Column with pineapple top	= Marduk
9. Simple (double ?) column	= Nabu
10. Column with two bulls' (lions' ?) heads	= (Nergal ?)
11. Star	= Ishtar
12. Seven dots	= Igigi

In the above list the order has been followed both of the emblems and the gods specified. The name of the god No. 10 is illegible, but is probably Nergal. But the bas-relief is not always plain, and I presume, from comparison with other monuments, the emblem for No. 10 should be drawn with two lions' heads instead of bulls' heads. Also, the emblem No. 9 should doubtless be made double, like the two narrow columns seen in figs. 3, 4, 5, instead of a single wider column.

We thus have gained knowledge of twelve emblems of gods (three of them identical horned hats, or turbans), of which five are columns, or asherahs; and these columns are so differentiated as to represent the five gods Ea, Ramman, Marduk, Nabu, and probably Nergal.

Now comes another very important step in the identification or corroboration of these emblems. We have considered the cone seals as figured in Assyrian or later art; and also the bas-reliefs of Assyrian kings, with their accompanying emblems.



FIG. 7.—Upper part of stele of Esarhaddon at Nahr el-Kelb.

But these emblems were evidently borrowed, with variations, from the accepted Babylonian emblems of the gods, as found scattered on the seal-cylinders, but gathered in numbers on the so-called boundary stones, or kudûrus. While Hommel and others have given some attention to them, and the accompanying inscriptions have been translated by Oppert and his successors, the figures themselves have not received the study they deserve, as they are very difficult to understand. But a late study of a number of kudûrus by M. J. de Morgan gives us new light. In a late volume of his "*Mémoires*," the *Recherches archéologiques*, 1900, giving the account of the diggings at Susa in 1897-99, is given, pp. 165-80, a chapter on twelve kudûrus found by de Morgan at Susa. Some of these are fragmentary, but others are among the finest that have yet been discovered. One (fig. 9) is of especial value, because it actually gives us, in a little epigraph



against each emblem, the name of the god, which finally settles the matter. Unfortunately, not all the names are legible. De Morgan, writing at Susa, without access to other material, and apparently having no knowledge of von Luschan's studies or Jensen's identifications, writes quite independently.

As I am here concerned chiefly with the columnar emblems, I will not go into a full discussion of these various emblems, but simply call attention to the fact that they fully corroborate the conclusions drawn from a study of the bas-relief of Bavian. There is, of course, no winged disk, which is an Assyrian device, probably borrowed from Egypt at the time of the invasions of

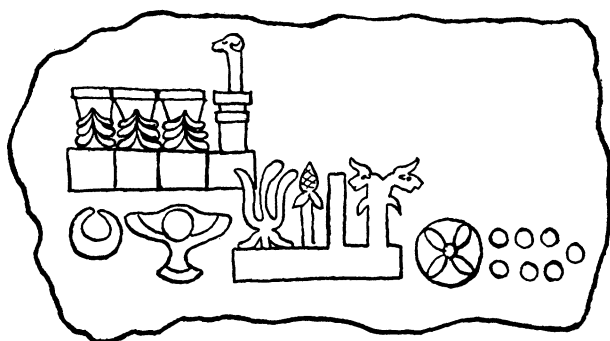


FIG. 8.—Rock-relief of Bavian.

the Eighteenth Dynasty, and modified by the omission of the asps. Shamash is represented by his familiar Babylonian emblem, the circle with four included rays of light alternating with four streams of water. Ishtar is, of course, the star. The seated goddess is Gula, identical with Bau. We had concluded that among the columnar gods the ram's head on the column represented Ea, although it seemed strange that he should be crowded out of the triad of gods represented by the horned turbans in order to make room for Assur, who precedes Anu. But this subordinate position, and the representation of Ea by a ram's head, is here justified, as Ea is represented in the same way by a ram's head on a column. But the column stands on a square shrine, or ark, under which is the fish-tailed capricorn of Ea, and the name distinctly written. The name of Marduk, another god whom we might have expected to be represented with more dignity, is also distinctly inscribed on his column, which gives us a sort of



lance-head, evidently corresponding with the emblem identified as that of Marduk on the Bavian bas-relief. The original idea is possibly that of a triangular pointed flame on the top of a column, but more likely a lance-head which is sometimes developed to a sort of pineapple, as in fig. 8, and sometimes reduced to a round dot, as in fig. 5. This kudûru also gives the names of four other deities, Gula, Zamama, Sukumuna, and Nusku, whom we do not find on the relief of Bavian.

The most elaborate of the boundary stones yet found is seen in fig. 10, found by de Morgan at Susa. On this eight columns appear, but the inscription gives us no further identification of them. It does, however, enable us to identify the emblem to the right of Ea, in the upper register, as that of Ninkharsag, or Belit.

The usual columns representing gods are thus distinguished and identified by the bas-relief of Bavian and the boundary stone of Susa. They are Ea, Ramman, Marduk, Nabu, and probably Nergal. The other emblems do not now concern us, and a number of them, owing to the illegibility of the epigraphs, are still uncertain. We may fairly presume that such columns as these, familiar in use and art from Elam to the Assyrian border, and from probably 1500 B. C. to 200 B. C. or later, were well known, with their variations, over Phœnicia and Palestine, and were objects of worship. Made of wood, they would not be preserved, and the representations we have of columns are chiefly of twin columns of a different sort, such as mazzeboth, in temples and figured on small coins. The column, or asherah, mainly in use would have represented the one sun-god Marduk, or Baal, under his various forms, and would have been easily cut in wood. Nine-tenths of the cone seals with figures of columns have the two columns of Marduk and his attendant Nabu, both easily engraved on stone or cut in wood. The worship of Ea or Nergal we should hardly expect to be usual in Phœnicia or Palestine; but that of Ramman, the Syrian Adad, would be familiar. His emblem, the thunderbolt, a zigzag trident or bident on a column, is not at all frequent on cone seals, and could not be conveniently cut on them, as it could not be hewn in wood. It would require a metal attachment on a wooden column. At present we must satisfy ourselves with the conclusion that within the extent of the Assyrian empire the asherahs represented individual gods,

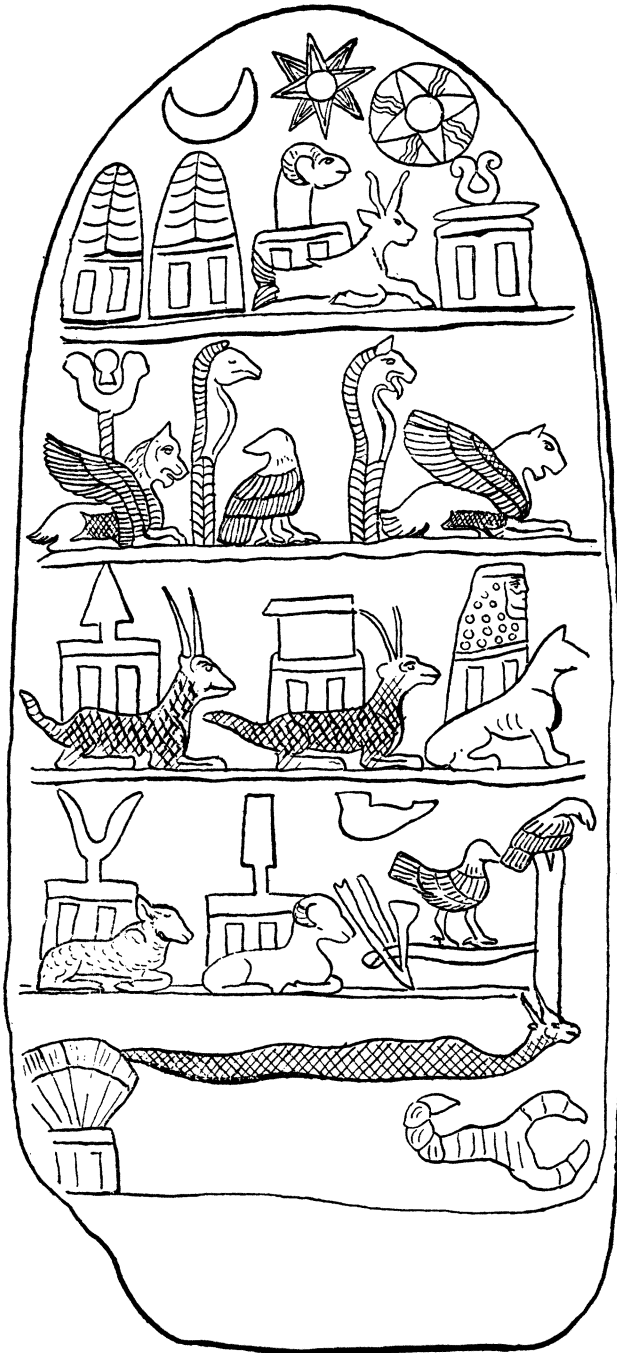


FIG. 10.—Boundary stone from Susa.

and the presumption that such was the case with those of Palestine in the time of the later Jewish kingdom. The various conjectures are far from probable which make the asherahs symbols of Ashtoreth, or of a supposed goddess Asherah, or give them a phallic origin; or even that of Robertson Smith, that they are a relic of earlier tree-worship. For their origin we have to go to Assyria, and thence back to Babylonia, as far, at least, as the time of the Kassite dynasty, in the middle of the second chiliad B. C.